The Diary of Richard Rumbold*

A REVIEW

A EUGENIST CAN BROADLY be described as someone who thinks it matters which people of the present generation contribute most generously to the next. Most reasonable people are thus eugenists without knowing it.

But why do the few become conscious eugenists and join our *Society*? Their reasons are numerous and variously compounded. They may be influenced by considerations drawn from biology, politics, social ideals, national ideals, philanthropy and, more cryptically, misanthropy. Their reasons may also be intimate and personal.

Among biological considerations are inferences from the evolution theory. We think of Galton. The organic world including man has been shaped by what Darwin called natural selection. Eugenics is a deliberate and humane application of the principle of selection to man: it enables him consciously to improve on himself.

Among political considerations, sometimes present in the minds of Platonists, is the belief that civilized society will founder in the absence of a guiding élite. Eugenics can teach us how to foster such an enlightened, disinterested and incorruptible minority.

Among the social ideals of upholders of democracy is that of improving the quality of the masses so that democracy becomes more responsible and workable, less easily manipulated by eloquent but corrupt demagogues. These same considerations enter into national ideals if one aspires to one's country taking some sort of lead in the world.

Philanthropic or humanitarian considerations enter if eugenics is held to be a means of reducing suffering, especially that caused by hereditary infirmities (and, we might add to-day, by such agencies as thalidomides and radiation). Misanthropy can enter cryptically when certain classes or races are held to be inferior and in need of suppression.

Lastly intimate personal considerations predominate when one's own troubles are (wholly or partly) attributable to hereditary causes. And it is here noteworthy that such legacies as have come our way have mostly been bequeathed by men so influenced. Thus it was that Mr. Henry Twitchin (1867–1930), after corresponding with Major Leonard Darwin in the late twenties, left us most of his fortune, thereby lifting us out of poverty into affluence;† and that recently Mr. Richard Rumbold (1913–61) left us a generous legacy of which more below.

How Richard Rumbold assessed the role of heredity as contributing to his own difficulties was vividly described in his earlier book *My Father's Son* (1949: Jonathan Cape) which was written under a pseudonym. In 1958 the book was re-issued under the author's true name. The second issue differs slightly from the first. It includes an introduction by the author's close friend Sir Harold Nicolson. To him the story provided

> An unexampled study of character triumphant over heredity, environment and ill-health. To me it seemed one of the most life-enhancing biographies that I had ever read.

High testimony!

A second minor difference is in the texts selected for quotation on the title-page: lines from Coleridge and Yeats are replaced by a grim passage from Baudelaire which bears on Rumbold's interest in eugenics:

> Mes ancêtres, idiots ou maniques, dans des appartements solennels, tous victimes de terribles passions.

Now we have a volume of extracts from Rumbold's diaries, selected and edited with copious explanatory comments, by his second

* **Plomer, William** (Editor). *A Message in Code: The Diary of Richard Rumbold 1932-1960.* London, 1964. Weidenfeld and Nicolson. Pp. 292. Price 36s.

† "It was," Mr. Twitchin wrote in 1922, "the fact that I was born of unsound parents and inherited their weaknesses and consequently have suffered thereby that first forced this question [of eugenics] upon me."

cousin and intimate friend William Plomer.

For those who knew Richard Rumbold as I did, this is a moving book. In the words of the late Dr. Denis Carroll, who helped him much by psycho-analysis, Rumbold was afflicted by "a chronic and only partially curable neurosis of many years standing." (He also suffered from pulmonary tuberculosis.) Among the features of his neurosis were alternations between periods of elation (sometimes amounting to ecstasy) and periods of paralysing depression—"a sense of futility and despair and hopelessness—a kind of colossal nihilism." These vicissitudes had blighted much of his life. He strove to find in them some sort of meaning.

In 1956, five years before his accidental death, Rumbold wrote:

> Life, I am inclined to think, has the fantastic quality of a message in code to which we do not possess the key.

The decoding key which he vainly sought was the attainment, in Plomer's words, of a "magic singleness of perception which he hoped would free his inner self from its turmoils and anxieties" a sudden syntactic vision or illumination which would put his misgivings and torments into a comprehensible perspective. The sought-for key, he hoped, would provide him with a compass-bearing and, in some sort, a bulwark.

The early entries covering the years 1932–54 are disjointed. They mainly record his moods and movements, the people he met, his activities as a writer and broadcaster, his unsuccessful attempts to write a novel, the hopes raised by psycho-analysis, and his failure to find the needed answer in Christianity. The decoding key, he came to feel, might be found in some warm and remote place: perhaps in the Orient; perhaps in Buddhism. During the years 1954–56 he explored the possibilities of the two main systems of Buddhism—the first in Ceylon and the second in Japan.

He went to Ceylon first. The entries during these years are full and carefully composed. They will provide for some readers the main interest of the book.

> What first drew me to Ceylon . . . was a hope of spiritual help. Brought up a Roman Catholic, I had long since lost my faith—but not my interest in religion or my need for it. Buddhism was the only religion which attracted me, and though I knew little about it I hoped I might perhaps find in it a means to the recovery of some form of belief.

Here is a fine description of a purification ceremony performed in Ceylon on a rock rising sheer out of the ocean to some 400 feet:

> The setting gives the ceremony an extraordinary beauty—the rock descending into the wide expanse of sea, the blue intersected by long and glittering beams of gold shed by the declining sun; the long coast line all round, massed with bright green palms that stand out stereoscopically clear in the concentration of light; the worshippers in bright sarongs and saris trailing down the face of the Rock like a garland; and the priest, an aloof and lonely figure standing on the dizzy cliff-point to perform the rites.

Rumbold questioned many people about the (Theravadist) form of Buddhism which predominates in Ceylon. Among his informants was a blue-eyed English Buddhist monk (a Bhikhu), an ex-combatant in the North African and Italian campaigns. This man was living like a hermit on an island in a lake. In the course of several visits to the island the English monk explained the disciplines of Theravada Buddhism and in particular those relating to self-emancipation from *Samsara*. This, we are told, is a Pali word meaning "perpetual wandering"; we wander in the stream of transient existence; we are immersed in illusion, heedlessness and ignorance; we are involved in "attachments, identifications and other bondages to earthly objects." Emancipation from *Samsara*, according to Theravadist teachings, demands drastic renunciations. These seemed too great for Rumbold. Of this English Bhikhu:

> I asked whether he thought it was possible for a man to practise the Buddhist way of life while remaining in the world.
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> "Up to a point you can," he said, "but it isn't easy. As a rule, one only begins to achieve any results at the point where renunciation begins."
>
> "I suppose one must first decide whether, after all, one wants to be rid of Samsara—whether, in fact, one is genuinely convinced that the pains of life exceed the pleasures."
>
> "That you must decide for yourself. And it's really the crucial question."

His friend, Rumbold tells us,

> had once or twice hinted that I might join him on his island and give myself over to strict meditation. But my moody and restless temperament did not fit me for a life of such austerity and seclusion. The long dark nights, my friend told me, were con-

> ducive to deep meditation; but how could I face such loneliness? He was of a more independent cast of mind than me, more capable of solitude, more austerely analytical and unpassionate in his attitude to life; in short, he was a born contemplative and I was not.

Thus were the demands of the Ceylonese form of Buddhism found impracticable. What about the northern (Mahayanist) form? Rumbold heard of the prevalence of Zen in Japan. Enlightenment (*Satori*), Zen taught, was not only attainable by recluses who subjected themselves to austerities. Drastic renunciations and the cultivation of non-attachment, Zen taught, were not necessary. *Satori* could come in a flash—in the here and now. Zen, Rumbold writes,

> was largely a creation of the more practical and more realistic Chinese genius; it seemed by comparison concrete, life-affirming, and, with its prospect of sudden enlightenment, *this*-worldly. It was to know more about Zen that I decided to leave Ceylon for Japan.

Though Zen did not decypher the message in code (which was in fact never decyphered), the quest in Japan was seemingly more rewarding than that in Ceylon. What, then, was the appeal of Zen?

The author's first experience was a snub. He made contact with an English-speaking Zen monk upon whom, like the average inquisitive European, he opened a fusillade of questions. Suddenly the monk turned on him: "Mr. Rumbold, you ask too many questions." Rumbold's account of Zen is closely bound up with his impressions of the Japanese character. Enlightenment (*Satori*) is courted by meditation: but the discipline is quite different from that of Ceylon. The Master of a Zen monastery prescribes the theme for meditation. He gives to the devotee a *Koan*, often a seemingly absurd riddle which has no connection with ethics, the transitoriness of life, or the destiny of the soul. The Koan which the Zen Master presented (in a chant) to Rumbold was: "What was your original face?" In due course there ensued the following dialogue:

> R.R.: "I have no original face because I always was."
>
> Zen Master (armed with a stick): "If you have no original face, then bring it here and show it to me."
>
> R.R.: "That is the whole point—I can't. I have nothing to show."
>
> Zen Master: "Then you must be nothing."

Exit Rumbold fearing a blow from the stick.

The neophyte must suspend or inhibit such mental processes (supposedly typical of Western modes of thinking) as abstraction, logical thought, discriminatory activities, and his awareness of a dualism between observer and observed. Concentration on the often insoluble *koan* generates a sense of inner tension which may be abruptly resolved by the flash of *Satori*. Sudden acts of violence, sometimes blows from a stick from the Master or a monk, may momentarily raise the tension and spark the flash.

Rumbold seems to have been attracted by the clash of opposites in Zen. There is severity, sometimes amounting to cruelty; but also "lightness, gaiety and humour." Strenuousness both in meditation and in daily life is exacted; yet there is "no such thing as an ethical system as we know it." The author concluded that Zen called for two qualities: hardness, and directness or immediacy. Yet the hard men could be friendly. Rumbold particularly hated an assistant head monk (called "M") who seemed to him thin-lipped, cruel and fanatical. This man would curse and savagely beat people. "He picked on everybody, including me. . . . He lost no opportunity to humiliate me." But one afternoon Rumbold found him, pink and flushed, sitting on a mat drinking *saké* from a jar. He invited Rumbold to join him and have a cup. The invitation was accepted and the strong drink loosened the author's tongue: "I told him in so many words that he was a bastard," adding: "You deserve a beating yourself."

"It is true, Rumbold San," replied the monk; "please hit me."

The author summarises the outcome of the monk's invitation (the passage concludes the editor's chapter dealing with Zen) as follows:

> I felt a curious and tantalizing ambivalence towards him—something compounded of both love and hate. Thereafter I began to acquire a new insight into Zen. In both hating and loving, in both fearing the hardness of the man and loving the softness, and in trying to reconcile my hate with my love (which in fact were one and the same thing) I was also achieving a reconciliation with life—a reconciliation ultimately . . . beyond words.

and speech. And it was "M" who had done it for me.

It was doubtless salutary for someone with the author's family background to be beaten and humiliated by a man in authority; and then suddenly to discover that the hated man was after all likeable.

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I knew Richard Rumbold for some fifteen years and with my daughter once visited him in a sanatorium. He was then, as always, perceptive, courageous and gay. Though he mentioned a recent bout of harrowing depression it was without a trace of complaint or self-pity. In his dealings with others he had perfect consideration and charming manners. He was deeply interested in our *Society:* he wanted us to espouse vigorous policies which could bring succour to people like himself. In his will he left us a substantial sum which he wished to be used for "education and propaganda with a view to stimulating people generally to take active steps to avoid children suffering unnecessarily from a bad mental inheritance, and the furtherance of any other measures, such as voluntary sterilization, which in the opinion of the *Society*, would mitigate this type of suffering."

The intimate diaries, containing much self-criticism and self-revelation, have been sensitively edited and helpfully annotated by his close friend William Plomer for whom the task, tentatively assigned to him by the author before his death, must have been a labour of love. To Mr. Plomer, Richard Rumbold's many friends owe a debt of keen gratitude.

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